

Review of Antoine Lilti's *Le monde des salons : Sociabilité et mondanité à Paris au XVIII<sup>e</sup> siècle*, Paris: Fayard, 2005

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The salons of Paris cut an impressive figure in the historiography of eighteenth-century France. They've been called, at one point or another, bastions of political sedition, the social base of the French Enlightenment, the headquarters of the bourgeois public sphere, the most egalitarian province of the Republic of Letters, and the central proving ground for the radical political philosophies of the French Revolution. Indeed a slough of revisionist historians have helped to place salons (and salonnières) at the very intersection of a vast reinterpretation of the political, cultural, gender, and intellectual history of the eighteenth century. As a result, the salon has come to evoke some powerful imagery. We imagine the baron d'Holbach pontificating on the virtues of atheism over a splendid meal of venison and red wine; we imagine Denis Diderot and Rousseau and d'Alembert plotting the imminent downfall of the French crown; we imagine Julie de Lespinasse, Madame du Deffand, and Mme Geoffrin overturning gender conventions and governing philosophical conversation with polished charm and sophisticated wit. In his brilliant new analysis of the salons of eighteenth-century Paris, Antoine Lilti locates the common denominator in each of these sundry visions—they are all products of the historical imagination.

*Le monde des salons* is as much a study in the historical imagination as it is an examination of the salons of the old regime. The first few chapters of the book attempt to disentangle the presumed historical object from the thick layers of nostalgia and anachronistic cultural impositions that have heretofore dominated the historiography. Along the way, Lilti systematically dismantles the reigning interpretation of the salon, and offers a much more nuanced and seemingly counter-intuitive reading of the available primary sources. The conclusion he reaches is fairly straightforward: when it comes to the salons of the eighteenth century, historians have let their imaginations run wild. Lilti proposes to shift from a eulogistic to a more critical and methodical approach. When the dust finally settles and the wrecking ball swings to a halt, the notion of the radical, egalitarian, philosophical late eighteenth-century Parisian salon finds itself in tattered shambles at the bottom of the historiographical dumpster.

Drawing on prudent and exhaustive archival research, Lilti sheds an abundance of new light on the socio-cultural history of the salon by scrapping the traditional binaries of the debate—public/private, Enlightened/conservative, and aristocratic/literary. Instead, he observes the salons through the refracted prism of “la sociabilité mondaine (406).” Lilti argues persuasively that the salons were never the reified “institutions” described by historians from Pierre Larousse to Dena Goodman. The word itself—*salon*—only adopted its modern meaning in the middle of the 1790s and the first half of the nineteenth century. The eighteenth century lacked a unified term for this “ensemble of practices.” The “salons” of the old regime—as we understand that concept today—went by an assortment of names: “le monde,” “la bonne compagnie,” “la bonne société,” “le grand

monde,” “le beau monde,” and above all “la société.” Lilti begins to deconstruct our reified image of the Parisian salon by paying close attention to the contemporary usage of language. He discovers, for example, that “salonnière” is a linguistic invention of the nineteenth-century. The eighteenth century had no term—and thus no concept—for the women who allegedly “governed” polite conversation, and presided over the salons as though they were miniature republics.<sup>[i]</sup> Lilti contends that the anachronistic concept of the “salonnière” falsely suggests that the salons were “well defined cultural institutions.” (110).”

So what is “la sociabilité mondaine?” It is much more than polite conversation and a well-timed *bon mot*.<sup>[ii]</sup> The ensemble of practices that form what we have come to call “the salon,” Lilti argues, denotes a group of wealthy urban elites, of both sexes, gathered in a private residence, who met on a regular basis, engaged in a diversity of social practices, ate dinner together, played games, had pleasing conversations, gambled incessantly, read poetry, performed theatrical representations, teased one another, established (and ruined) personal reputations, confirmed (and sometimes redefined) social hierarchies, sought romance, wrote and circulated letters, spread gossip, and showed enormous amounts of hospitality, with the ultimate goal being the practice of urbane sociability itself. This diverse array of practices, which Lilti terms “les pratiques mondaines,” also went by a variety of names in the eighteenth century: “une ruelle,” “un cercle,” “une coterie,” “une maison,” “la compagnie,” or, again, “la société.” Lilti offers the most conceptually precise definition of a salon to date, and this allows him to expand the field of study and bring a much greater number of elite households into the mix. Indeed, *Le monde des salons* profiles and analyzes dozens of salons of the middle and late eighteenth century. The six most frequently studied, those of Mme Du Deffand, Julie de Lespinasse, Mme Geoffrin, les Necker, les Helvétius, and les d’Holbach, are integrated into a much broader discussion of “la sociabilité mondaine.” The main argument in *Le monde des salons* is that the habitués of eighteenth-century Parisian salons cared far more about food, relaxation, and entertainment than they did about politics, literature, or serious philosophical debate. Louis-Sébastien Mercier once wrote that “chez le peuple des salons, la première affaire, celle de tous les jours, c’est de s’amuser.” Antoine Lilti couldn’t agree more.

This argument flies in the face of current historiographical convention. As Lilti points out, it has become a veritable *idée fixe* in the literature on eighteenth-century France to assume that the salons of Paris were hotbeds of political activism, dynamic sites of intellectual exchange, and the *éminence grise* of enlightened public opinion. To establish this point, Lilti takes aim at a long historiographical tradition that has either perpetuated the aforementioned vision of the salons, or reinforced it by simply reversing the terms of the debate. Indeed, *Le monde des salons* stands as a direct frontal attack against the respective and often contradictory portrayals of salon culture in the works of Jürgen Habermas, Dena Goodman, Daniel Gordon, Marc Fumaroli, Elizabeth Williams, Charles Kors, Jolanta Pekacz, and Steven Kale, amongst others.

Lilti begins by historicizing the mythical “literary salon.” The notion that the salons were the *atelier* of the French Enlightenment dates back to the end of the nineteenth century. The first chapter, l’Invention du salon (XIX<sup>e</sup>-XX<sup>e</sup> siècle), amply demonstrates that hagiographic historians such as Gustave Lanson structured the trajectory of the debate by propagating the idea that salons were an intellectual and

subversive “institution.” Lilti offers compelling evidence to show that subsequent generations have swallowed whole the distorted legacy of the Parisian salon. He argues that historians of the twentieth century greatly exaggerated the “scientific” and “literary” output of the salons.<sup>[iii]</sup> The fact that the encyclopedists frequented Parisian salons does not mean that they chose to spend their time engaged in heated philosophical debate. Moreover, as Lilti exhibits with ease, the many plays, poems, and works of prose that were read aloud in “la bonne compagnie” were neither produced “in common” nor meant to be anything other than pleasing forms of entertainment. The sources that issue from the salon milieu—letters, police reports, and private memoirs—are noticeably lacking in references to intellectual subject matter. What’s more, Lilti contends that salon culture tended to frown upon the fusion of *divertissement* and serious literary or philosophical endeavors. Women who tried to blend the two practices were mercilessly chastised. The baron d’Holbach, an unrepentant atheist by day, locked up the scientific cabinet and put away the books once the guests had arrived for dinner. Theory and politics were checked at the front door, and those who obstinately rambled on about Newton or Maupeou committed the most egregious faux pas of all—they incited boredom. The picture that emerges from *Le monde des salons* is that “la bonne compagnie” segregated “les pratiques mondaines” from the sober pursuit of natural knowledge, and provided a space for embattled philosophers to kick off their shoes and forget the day-time stresses of *philosophie*. *Le monde des salons* unceremoniously banishes both “the Enlightenment” and “the Republic of Letters” from the cozy confines of the Parisian salon.

Next, Lilti swivels the wrecking ball in the direction of the bourgeois public sphere. If Jürgen Habermas and Dena Goodman are the ministers who wedded in holy matrimony the salon to the “sphère publique bourgeoise,” Antoine Lilti is the heartless lawyer who shows up with the divorce papers. He writes with bravado that “les salons ne sont pas l’espace public. Ils ne forment pas une opinion éclairée, libérale, ou politiquement contestatrice, à l’écart des rouages traditionnels de la politique d’Ancien Régime.” Positioning himself alongside Mona Ozouf, Lilti shows that salon habitués placed their value system and idiosyncratic standards of quality in clear opposition to the unreflective ideas of the “popular” public sphere.<sup>[iv]</sup> “La société,” he argues at length, “s’oppose très nettement au public (412),” just as the opinion of “la bonne société” was seen as the very antithesis of “l’opinion publique (327, 334).”<sup>[v]</sup> The salons puppeteered the *grand public* no more than Geppetto puppeteered the sentient Pinocchio. Paddling upstream in the current literature, Lilti argues that Parisian salons should be removed from the seemingly ubiquitous public sphere. What was “public” about them, he asks? One needed contacts, reputation, and flattering letters of recommendation to enter the privileged space of “la bonne compagnie.” A salon was, after all, situated inside a private household. And yet, at the same time, the cultural practices of the Parisian salon differed substantially from the intimacy and seclusion of the private sphere. “La sociabilité mondaine” at times toed the line between the two spheres, as Lilti often notes, but generally adhered to its own distinct values, practices, and cultural representations. *Le monde des salons* thus offers a provisional resolution to the “espace privé/espace public” conundrum, and challenges the dualistic and simplistic categories of debate that have dominated the study of the salon for the past fifty years. Furthermore, Lilti unravels the notion that salons were dominated by the bourgeoisie. The salons of Paris, he contends, were overwhelmingly aristocratic in social composition and entirely aristocratic in social

practice (148): “Les salons sont donc un monde aristocratique (159).”<sup>[vi]</sup> “La bonne société” went to great lengths to cordon itself off from the social networks of the Parisian bourgeoisie (151-152, 155-158). People like Diderot and Mme Geoffrin are the exception that proves the rule.

Lilti even goes so far as to argue that the salons were extensions of royal court at Versailles: “le monde est à la fois une extension de la Cour et une émanation de la Ville (167, see also 221 and 364).” To a very large extent, the court and the Parisian salons shared the same practices of sociability and the same overlapping cast of characters. *Le monde des salons* thus seeks a certain rapprochement with the works of Norbert Elias. Both Lilti and Elias, for example, note the profound influence of the court aristocracy on Parisian high society.<sup>[vii]</sup> Lilti’s salons brim with snobbish princes, wealthy landowners, and powerful diplomats. In opposition to Daniel Gordon, Lilti argues that the salons were ruled by “civilité et distinction,” not republican equality (169).<sup>[viii]</sup> One could even say that Lilti has exchanged the Republic of Letters for the Empire of Elite Sociability. The salons, he notes, were extremely hierarchical social spaces, dominated by rank-conscious urban elites. Lilti even depicts the salons as miniature monarchical courts (and some, like the Temple of the prince de Conti, were indeed royal households)—they established reputations, patronized the arts, and hosted the most influential leaders of Europe. The salons were a far cry from the egalitarian communities of intellectual camaraderie imagined by recent historians: “les salons ne sont pas des espaces iréniques et égalitaires animés par la seule recherche de la convivialité et du loisir amical (169).” The relationship between men of letters and the patrons of “la bonne société” was one part symbiotic and three parts asymmetrical. Philosophers and salon proprietors, it is true, circulated cultural capital back and forth—the salon household earned recognition by hosting illustrious intellectuals, and the *philosophes* earned protection and some much-needed income. (The Neckers, for example, gave Suard a pension of 800 livres, and the prosperous Helvétius shelled out hefty pensions to Marivaux, Saurin, and Turpin).<sup>[ix]</sup> But—and this point is crucial—men of letters depended on the generosity and wealth of “la bonne société.” They had neither equal status nor intellectual license. In theory, at least, this is why Rousseau fled the dependency of the salons for the freedom of the French countryside.

Sifting through the wreckage left in the wake of *Le monde des salons*, however, the reader comes across several inconsistencies jutting out of the heaping rubble. First of all, despite his successful efforts to exhibit the diversity of salon practices, Lilti ends up privileging the aristocratic aspects of the salon. The book inadvertently corroborates, to a certain degree, the “conservative” interpretation of the salons mapped out in the works of Steven Kale and Jolanta Pekacz.<sup>[x]</sup> The practices of “la sociabilité mondaine” ultimately reinforced aristocratic hierarchies and silenced the critical voice of the French *philosophes*. Lilti himself states that the “salons [were] an aristocratic world.” Second, *Le monde des salons* tends to equate “la sociabilité mondaine” with urban high society more generally. In a sense, the book isn’t about salons at all—it’s a sweeping socio-cultural analysis of the aristocracy of late eighteenth-century Paris. Lilti’s definition of the salon feels a bit too expansive. This is the result of his attempt to unify the sundry components of salon life emphasized by rival historians. What aristocratic Parisian household *didn’t* host regular dinner parties or organize poker games or engage in a variety of social practices? What wealthy nobleman *didn’t* pension or employ a bourgeois philosopher at

some point? What duke or marquis *didn't* gossip and read poetry and show hospitality to invited guests? Lilti never attempts to situate “la bonne compagnie” within a broader aristocratic milieu or delineate “les pratiques mondaines” from other aristocratic cultural practices. As a result, the reader finishes the book with the impression that virtually every denizen of elite Parisian society participated in salon culture in one form or another.

The final problem with the book—and the most interesting from the perspective of intellectual history—is the severity with which Lilti exiles the Republic of Letters from the precincts of the Parisian salon. Lilti offers compelling evidence to suggest that intellectual practices were never the primary concern of “la bonne société.” He also succeeds at demonstrating the discrepancies between the (idealized) values of the (so-called) Republic of Letters and those of the Parisian salon. But one should be careful not to toss out the baby with the proverbial bathwater. Intellectual practices *did* play a supportive role in the ensemble of “pratiques mondaines,” even if they differed from the intellectual practices of the Republic of Letters. The argument has been made, for example, that Raynal’s *Histoire des deux Indes* was a collective operation written partially in the salons of Mlle de Lespinasse and the Baron d’Holbach.<sup>[xi]</sup> In addition, the bitter dispute between the abbés Galiani and Morellet over the liberalization of the grain trade raged for several months inside the walls of the Parisian salon.<sup>[xii]</sup> Furthermore, there exists undeniable evidence that d’Holbach’s coterie at times drifted into debates over controversial philosophical topics. Lilti himself mentions a discussion about “atheism” that Diderot had at the salon of the sociable Baron (208). He also mentions that Mme d’Épinay and her coterie squabbled over the relative merits of Chancellor Maupeou’s parliamentary reforms (358). A third example—again mentioned by Lilti—concerns the countless number of literary works that were read aloud in the “la bonne société.” Surely it counts for something that Beaumarchais, Chastellux, and La Harpe delivered works in the salons of Paris? In what sense are these private readings not “literary” practices—even if they were only meant to please? Moreover, contemporary observers of French intellectual life overwhelmingly associated the salons with the Republic of Letters. Bachaumont’s *Mémoires secrets* often situates “la bonne société” inside the precincts of the Republic. Even the salon of M. Doublet, as Lilti notes on page 394, produced a journal called *les Mémoires secrets de la république des lettres* (394).<sup>[xiii]</sup> All of this evidence leads to the same conclusion: the practice of critical intellectual debate still deserves a seat in the salons of eighteenth-century Paris, even if it is at the far end of the table.

Despite these relatively trivial shortcomings, *Le monde des salons* offers a fresh and innovative perspective on the salons of eighteenth-century Paris. Antoine Lilti is an important new voice in the history of early modern France, and his stimulating book is sure to make a splash in the historiography of old regime cultural practices. Lilti writes with the grace and confidence of a seasoned professional, and *Le monde des salons* is certainly the new “must read” on the history of the pre-Revolutionary French salon. The bibliography alone is worth the price of the book. I predict that it will become a foundational text in the field. For those who are unconvinced by Lilti’s radical revisionism, I recommend the following intellectual exercise: read in tandem *Le monde des salons* and Dena Goodman’s *Republic of Letters*. And if you have students, let them battle it out.

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- [i] See Dena Goodman, *The Republic of Letters : A Cultural History of the French Enlightenment* (Ithaca: Cornell Univ. Press, 1994). This idea has become a true commonplace in the historiography. See, for example, Mark Hulliung: "At the residence of the baron d'Holbach on the rue Royale the philosophes enjoyed a salon dedicated to and governed by themselves, the one salon where there was no hostess imposing a rule of constraint..." Mark Hulliung, *The Autocritique of Enlightenment* (Cambridge, Harvard Univ. Press, 1994), 7.
- [ii] See Marc Fumaroli, "La conversation," *Les Lieux de Mémoires*, III-Les Frances, tome 2, pp. 679-743; also see Bendetta Craveri, *l'Âge de la conversation*, (Paris: Gallimard, 2002).
- [iii] See page 262. See Charles Kors, *D'Holbach's Coterie : An Enlightenment in Paris* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1977); also see Elizabeth A. Williams, "Physicians, vitalism and gender in the salon," *Studies in Eighteenth-Century Culture*, 29, 2000, pp. 1-21.
- [iv] See Mona Ozouf, *l'Homme régénéré : essai sur la Révolution française* (Paris: Gallimard, 1989).
- [v] Lilti usually calls this concept 'l'opinion mondaine.' Also, see page 334, where he notes the following: "Par conséquent, si on définit l'espace public, à la façon d'Habermas, par l'usage public de la critique par des individus privés, il faut bien convenir que les salons n'en faisaient pas partie. Ils étaient plutôt des espaces de consécration propres à la bonne société."
- [vi] This portion of the book is meant as a criticism of Habermas. Lilti also casts doubt on the work of Colin Lucas, who argued in the 1970s that the bourgeoisie and the nobility co-existed as a single homogeneous aristocracy. See, for example, Colin Lucas, "Nobles, bourgeois and the origins of the French Revolution," *Past and Present*, no. 60 (Aug, 1973), pp.84-126.
- [vii] See pages 73, 95, 97, 323, and 414. See Norbert Elias, *The Civilizing Process* trans. E. Jephcott (Oxford: Blackwell, 1994); also see Norbert Elias, *The Court Society* transl. E. Jephcott(N.Y.: Pantheon, 1983). This argument is also directed at the work of Daniel Gordon, who contends, in opposition to Elias, that the salons of Paris functioned independently of the royal court. See footnote below.
- [viii] See Daniel Gordon, *Citizens Without Sovereignty : Equality and Sociability in French Thought, 1670-1789* (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1994). Lilti rightly criticizes Gordon for neglecting to study the concept of 'société' in terms of 'la bonne société.' Lilti also argues that Gordon wrongly equates sociability with social equality. See page 84.
- [ix] See page 171 (and all of chapter 5).
- [x] See p. 69, for example. See Jolanta T. Pekacz, *Conservative Tradition in Pre-Revolutionary France : Parisian Salon Women* (New York.: Peter Lang, 1999); Steven D. Kale, *French Salons, High Society, and Political Sociability from the Old Regime to the Revolution of 1848* (Baltimore: JHU Press, 1994).
- [xi] The evidence for this claim is in fact pretty shaky, and Lilti is careful to note the lack of specific references to any collective work on the *Histoire des deux Indes*. Dena Goodman, following Glotz and Maire, makes the assertion on page 145. However, the page she cites in the *Salons du XVIIIe siècle*—329— does not exist. The book is only 287 pages long. The only time that Glotz and Maire mention Raynal's *Histoire* is on page 266, and they make no reference to any collective writing operation. In the end, this example probably helps to further establish Lilti's claim that the evidence for the philosophical output of Parisian salons rests largely on inference and exaggeration. See Marguerite Glotz and Madelaine Maire, *Salons du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Hachette, 1944). See also *The Republic of Letters*, 145.
- [xii] This is a claim made by Dena Goodman in the *Republic of Letters*, and by Glotz and Maire in the *Salons du XVIIIe siècle*. Lilti disputes this claim, again, based on a lack of hard evidence.
- [xiii] This journal is in fact a variant of Bachaumont's *Mémoires secrets*.